

ON THE LINE

FOR WORKER-STUDENT CONTROL

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TRANSIT: NEXT PHASE

by Ben Mered

It wasn't only the trains and buses that started up again with the end of the 11 day transit strike. It also marked a new phase in the problems of the millions of commuters that must rely on the decaying system, as well as those of the 33,000 workers who keep the system running. As of this writing, these problems are far from solved.

There are still constant breakdowns due to deteriorating tracks, defective subway cars and obsolete buses. Transit workers must still work with antiquated equipment and under hazardous working conditions. They are still subjected to dictatorial management practices, such as the Special Investigation Unit, better known as the 'Beakies'. This notorious unit was set up by the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) to spy on the workers on the job and at home.

Like all working people today, transit workers must still cope with rising inflation. This, plus a now deepening recession, can only mean a lower standard of living for transit workers, despite the wage increases gained from the strike. This will be made even worse by the fines demanded under the Taylor Law.

(cont. on p.4)

INSIDE:

URBAN BLUES

Pg. 3

RECESSION-GO-ROUND Pg. 7

WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE BELIEVE,
WHAT WE WANT Pg. 8

POSTAL WORKERS

by Mike Harris

Michael McDermott, a 25 year-old postal worker, was crushed to death on December 15, 1979 at the Bulk & Foreign Mail Center in Jersey City. He died when he was grabbed by a conveyor belt and pulled into the machinery.

Safety devices that would have prevented his death had been removed by management in order to speed up output. In fact, one supervisor who had previously shut down the area for safety violations was demoted for "obstructing the mail." Thus workers who say McDermott's death amounts to murder by the postal bosses are entirely correct.



This accident was not the result of unique circumstances. These are the conditions that Bulk Mailing Center (BMC) workers have to face daily. BMC workers had been assigned mandatory overtime during the pre-Christmas rush, working up to 11 hours/day and 6 days/week. The

(cont. on p.2)

Postal Workers (cont. from p.1)

BMC had 31.9 accidents per 100 workers, in one year, a startlingly high rate for any occupation.

The BMC's safety record is a direct result of the Postal Service's "productivity" drive. 100,000 postal jobs have been eliminated by attrition over the last 10 years, while mail volume has increased. 15 workers are killed each year in the Postal Service, nationwide, and \$600 million is spent annually on workers' compensation. On top of this, workers are often harassed by management when they try to report their injuries.

The Jersey City BMC has also been a center of worker militancy. The workers there initiated the 1978 wildcat strike. A major cause for the militancy is the unsafe conditions that workers there endure. Mike McDermott's death vindicates the actions of those who struck, about 200 of whom were fired. 150 of these are still fighting to regain their jobs.

MORGAN FACILITY

Five months have passed since the controversial Morgan General mail facility, commonly referred to by postal workers as the "Morgan monster", was opened in Manhattan. Since that time Morgan's celebrated conveyor belt system has been a failure, with machines failing to operate properly or safely.



"He'll be ready for work just as soon as the cast dries..."

Safety hazards have caused trays of letters and sacks of mail to fall off the overhead belts and on to the heads of the workers below. In February, a sack of mail crashed through the ceiling of the transportation swingroom. Luckily, none of the workers eating lunch were hurt. A week

later, however, a woman was seriously hurt when a 15 pound mail sack fell off a belt. Due to rank-and-file pressure, management was forced to install safety netting underneath some of the belts. Most of these safety nets, though, are made of flimsy, light-weight cloth and are tied in place by cord. Even by the limited Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) standards, these supposed safety precautions are substandard.

MEADOWLANDS FACILITY

After Mike McDermott's death, postal management began to shift work out of the BMC to other facilities, primarily to the Meadowlands facility in North Jersey. During the Congressional hearings into the death, on January 7th and 8th, Regional Post Master Jellison admitted that all the mailing facilities were operating far above their capacities.

Even so, the transfer of operations was necessary, according to Jellison, though he reassured postal workers that this shift was only temporary. Now they're being told, unofficially, that the shift will last at least until the end of the year.

This shift has created many new problems. The Postal Sorting Machines (PSM's) at the Meadowlands weren't built to handle the type of parcels now being diverted there. Furthermore, literally thousands of parcels are being destroyed by the PSM's daily.

Due to these foul-ups customer service is being delayed, and more workers are being transferred to rewrap the damaged parcels. This creates understaffing on the machines and adds to the workload of other workers. This, in turn, adds further to the probability of more accidents.

Complaints still fall on deaf ears, as management staffs the PSM's with part-timers. From all accounts the union is doing virtually nothing to prevent any of this.

OSHA NO ANSWER

The current strategy of the leaders of the American Postal Workers' Union (APWU)

(cont. on p.6)

URBAN BLUES

by Mike Klett

It has been coming for so long it seems like it was inevitable. Bit by bit, a piece here, apart there, street by street and blocks at a time. Certainly there was a way of stopping the decay of this city. People have fought hard to keep their homes and neighborhoods from dying.

The city is as good as dead. It is only a matter of time before the last glow turns into ash. Don't be fooled by the lights in Rockefeller Center, Citicorp Center and the World Trade Center. Those lights don't mean life; they are weak embers flickering before the fire dies.

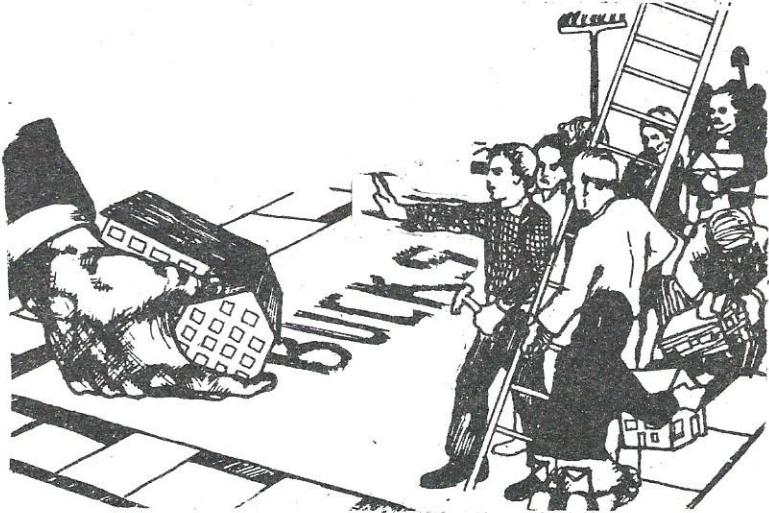
New York will not die of old age. It will be murdered. But who would want to kill such "a nice place to live"? No one really. It was an accident. Landlords just wanted higher and higher profits. Business just wanted low taxes and a "good business climate." The politicians just wanted to please and the banks just wanted everything.

The rich and famous wallow in the spot light of conspicuous consumption. The New York media, sophisticated like nowhere else, expertly programs the necessary controlling messages to keep us dancing through the night. Why think of our work and needs when we can have our nights and weekends of real life. When we're dressed in the right designers clothes, going to the right discos, getting high the latest way, then we're "just like the beautiful people." After all, they say, aren't we all basically the same? We're all New Yorkers, those real down home folks, always adapting to life's pitfalls, always surviving the crises, one after another: Weather, traffic, crime or fiscal.

All we need is a television or a newspaper to feel like we're a part of the action in this city. But walking down the street with eyes open we can see the real story. Except for the forbidding estate of the wealthy Upper East Side and a few small areas, this city seems under siege. The police patrol the streets like an occupying army. Their loyalty is to the rich whose loyalty is to the rich whose property they have sworn to protect at any price.

It would be easy to believe that the ruling class in this society has a plan for all of us; that a small conspiring group is pulling the strings. It's not like that though. The present social structure of this country has come out of decades of class struggle, with the ruling class remaining on the top.

By controlling the media and educational system, they have always found ways to circumvent large movements of discontent. The most effective method is to instill in us the idea that we have a stake in preserving the status quo. There's no need for a blatant show of force to keep most people in line with this ideology. When jobs are scarce, anyone working, from a boss to a sweatshop worker will defend the system against those who might think that a decent income is deserved by all. When housing is scarce and inadequate, almost anyone living inside of four walls is busy worrying about defending his or her small piece of property from the entry of "minorities" trying to find a decent place in this society.



I don't have to tell you what you already know. My purpose is to try and convey the idea that what you see and know is the norm. This society makes you feel that if there's a problem, it's only your problem, since no one else is complaining. This system survives by convincing each of us that everyone else is happy. Well, we're not.

MORE CUTBACKS

On May 1, the MTA eliminated the weekend half-fare, and restricted senior-citizen half-fare to non-rush hours. They were unconcerned that most senior citizens are highly dependent on mass transit. Other "non-essential services" that may be eliminated are the AA and CC local trains, the Times Square-Grand Central Shuttle, all 7th Ave. IRT locals, and 1023 surface bus lines.

Looking at the present state of the NYC transit system, one can only wonder how things could have gotten this bad. The transit strike gave Mayor Koch, the MTA Board, and the media an opportunity to place the blame on the transit workers. But now that the strike is over, and everything is as it was, who can they blame now?

PRODUCTIVITY SCAM

The MTA's stock answer to commuter complaints about subway doors that don't open, unlighted subway cars, and trains and trains and buses that breakdown midway through their routes, is 'we need more worker productivity.' But how productive can workers be when they must steer modern buses into narrow stalls built for horse-drawn trolleys?

While we're on the subject of working conditions, let us note that transit workers do not even come under the flimsy protection of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Thus, transit workers are exposed to a multitude of dangerous conditions, such as:

- 1) Up to 12 hours per day of exposure to noise levels of 100 decibels. Studies have proven that 85 decibels can impair hearing. Hearing damage contributed to the deaths of 108 workers, who couldn't hear approaching trains.
- 2) Air pollution--the Environmental Protection Agency says that subway air is so toxic that it is hazardous to the health of those who breathe it. This includes passengers as well.
- 3) 18 different toxic chemicals, including asbestos, which maintenance worker handle everyday. Due to lack of protective clothing and lack of places to

change, workers often carry home asbestos dust, exposing their families to the risk of cancer and asbestosis.

- 4) Broken suspension systems in trains and buses. Riding these all day can cause severe kidney and spinal damage.

BELT TIGHTENING

When confronted with all this, the MTA has simply thrown up its hands and said, "But we don't have the money." This was "Crazy Eddie" Koch's response as well, every time he shut down or threatened to cut back essential human services. It is interesting to note that while the Mayor was busy tightening everyone else's belt, the City Council managed to vote itself a 50 per cent raise, with his blessing.

We are still told there is no money to upgrade mass transit. But Koch and his cronies, like Ravitch the construction millionaire, have no qualms about supporting the billion-dollar Westway project. They also supported Governor Carey's transportation bond issue, which gives the banks 25-35 million dollars a year in interest payments. These could not only have covered the new contract but many other basic expenses as well.

The fact that the MTA is running a deficit in the first place is no surprise. In



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1953, when the MTA was formed, transportation experts warned that rapid transit could not be self-sustaining, and should be considered a public service like fire protection or sanitation. Why then, did the politicians refuse to plan for such an occurrence?

WHERE THE MONEY GOES

But now the MTA and the City don't have the money. Besides the chronic mismanagement of funds, there has been the constant reshuffling of the city's economy in order to serve the interests of the banks and big business. They have enriched themselves at our expense, and left the City begging for nickels and dimes in Albany and Washington.

There is also a national military budget to be maintained. As it stands now New Yorkers are shelling out \$5 billion annually in taxes to the Pentagon, with no comparable to the city in jobs and money. Now they are asking for \$100 billion to build the MX missile. But who will rebuild our subways and buses?

STOP THE FARE INCREASE!

Now they are planning to raise the fare. What can be done to stop them? Back in 1975, when the fare went from 35 to 50



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Rest In Peace?

cents, some people responded by trying to organize resistance in their communities. Either individually or in groups, they would simply walk through the gates or jump the turnstiles, and encourage others to do the same. Soon the idea became so popular that Mayor Beame had to beef up the Transit Police in order to stop the budding movement.

While this struggle did not succeed, it still showed how direct action, instead of relying on politicians or bureaucrats, was and still is the most effective strategy in New York's community struggles.

A good example of this is what happened 5 years ago when the City tried to close a number of public libraries and schools in less affluent neighborhoods. The communities organized, occupied the buildings, and maintained them by themselves. Many people participated, sharing the work and the facilities as a community should. Eventually the City was forced to give in a little and resume some of the funding. A similar thing happened with the famous People's Firehouse in North Brooklyn.

Such good results can be achieved if the people of this city get together and fight the next fare hike. In order for this to succeed, there must be real solidarity and unity of action between commuters and transit workers. Unfortunately, this was not the case during the recent strike. Only by working together can we beat the bosses and the fare.

Do you not see the stupidity of asking relief from Albany with immense wealth within a stone's throw from here?... They will go on robbing you, your children, your children's children, unless you wake up, unless you become daring enough to demand your rights. Well, then demonstrate before the rich; demand work. If they do not give you work, demand bread. If they deny you both, take bread. It is your sacred right!

--Emma Goldman, 1892

Postal Workers (cont. from p.2)

is to get the Postal Service covered by OSHA, which currently does not have jurisdiction over postal facilities. A bill to enact this has passed the House of Representatives but is now bogged down in the Senate, where big business is mounting a major drive to wipe out most of OSHA's jurisdiction.

While the Postal Service should clearly not be exempt from OSHA, however inadequate the protection, postal workers should have no illusions. OSHA was created by the government to make just enough reforms to cover up for the system, and not to change it. Its performance in the private sector is notoriously poor. With the deepening of the coming recession, the employers and their political allies are not about to allow agencies of their government to improve health and safety at the expense of their profits. The Postal Service's 1979 surplus of \$470 million, the first in 34 years, was achieved at the expense of the workers.

RANK-AND-FILE STRUGGLE

The rank-and-file struggle has taken many twists and turns since 1978. Since the time of the wildcat strike the Postal Workers Defense Committee (PWDC) has foc-

used primarily on health and safety conditions, as well as gaining amnesty for the remaining 150 fired postal workers.

They have also been trying to elect rank-and-file to leadership positions. Prior to the 1978 wildcat, postal workers in the N.Y. Metro Local elected Kenny Leiner, now a leading spokesperson of the PWDC, Mailhandler Vice-President. Leiner was fired from his position in 1978 by APWU President Andrews due to his active role in the wildcat strike. Shortly after his sacking he was expelled from the union.

This year, the PWDC is backing the Unity Team, a slate of rank-and-file candidates in the N.Y. Metro Local elections. They will also be backing a similar, though relatively unknown, slate of candidates at the APWU National Convention in August. The strategy here seems to be to first oust Moe Biller's Metro Action slate in the Metro Local, and then use this a base to topple Andrews and the rest of the national leadership.

The Unity Team, if elected, will be pushing for several key demands at the convention, such as:

- No Negotiations Without Amnesty
- A Decent Contract in 1981
- Health and Safety--A Union Priority
- One Union for all Postal Workers
- Constitution Change-Protection for Union Officers

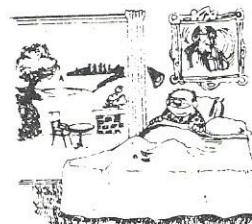
If the Unity Team loses the election, and no other similar slate does so, then these demands may be put forth by individual delegates or by a caucus. This was done at the 1978 Convention by the "Fired Workers Delegation."

THE LIMITS OF REFORM

While we believe that it is important for the rank-and-file to have democratic control over their unions, and agree with the sentiment of the first four demands, we disagree with the tactic of trying to gain Executive positions. Our opposition is based on hard experience.

Firstly, the election of rank and filers to such positions doesn't necessarily guarantee that the newly elected leaders will not sell out. A perfect example of this is Jimmy Hoffa, who was at one time a militant Teamster who rose up from the ranks.

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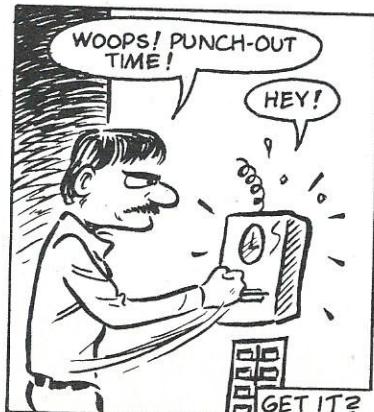


Secondly, the election of rank and file members to union office wouldn't prevent the national leadership from seizing the local treasury and local records and putting the local into receivership. This has happened many times in the recent past, a striking example being Local 2 of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers in California. The national union could also attempt to expel individual members on trumped up charges.

Most importantly, the election of new officers will not alter the bureaucratic structure of the union. Rather than decentralizing control of the union, and placing power in the hands of the members, what will remain will still be a "top-down" structure. This has been one of the most serious weaknesses of American unions in general.

In this context we can see that merely electing militant or radical union leadership is no solution. Militancy, in order to be effective, must come from the workers' themselves and be expressed in the daily confrontation between management and labor. The energy that will go into a national election campaign would be better used in educating rank and file members and supporting them in direct action.

It doesn't matter in the long run how militant the union leadership may be, how many Congressional hearings will be held, or how many OSHA investigations are made. It can only be the rank and file who can change the present organization and condition of their work through direct action and solidarity on the shop floor.



RECESSION-GO-R U N D O N

By A. Kogan

Well, folks, it's time again for that traveling circus we've all come to know but not love--the recession. This show has proven so popular that this is its third performance in the last 10 years.

This particular performance is somewhat different than the last two. Usually, in Presidential election years, incumbent candidates will try to artificially overheat the economy through things like deficit spending in order to assure their re-election. Nixon did this in 1972, and as a result we had the severest economic slump of a generation in 74-75.

Carter's strategy this time is a bit different. His concern isn't to win the support of the labor bureaucrats but of corporate capital, which is more and more going over to Reagan and free market economic policy. Thus Carter will gladly trade off a little unemployment in order to slow down inflation and win another 4 years in the White House.

Not that Carter is the only one to blame. The oil companies, fearing more price rises by OPEC in response to a falling dollar, need a recession. So do America's allies, who fear the effects of U.S. inflation on their own crisis ridden economies.

Let's not forget those fine folks at the pentagon. They've been working hard now for over 3 decades, consuming scarce resources like machine tools and raw materials in order to build those weapons we just can't live without. They've also been printing money to pay the bills, so we can now enjoy recession and inflation at the same time. The fact that it's an election year doesn't bother them, since no one elected them in the first place.

So once again we're off for another ride on the economic merry-go-round. Maybe this time though, we'll grab the brass ring and stop the whole damned circus.

Who We Are

We call ourselves "anarchist-syndicalists" and we have named our group the Libertarian Workers Group. We are a committee of working people and students who live in the N.Y. metropolitan area. We publish ON THE LINE because we feel that the news and experiences which come from many small battles between exploiters and exploited, powerful and powerless, must be shared if the workers are someday to win.

What We Believe

We believe that the capitalist class is unnecessary and that government (the political state and all its bureaus) is inherently oppressive. The state and the capitalist class, while not seeing eye-to-eye on everything, are built on domination and exploitation. By "stealing" from the real producers--the workers--and then selling to consumers--most of whom are workers too--the capitalist is able to make profits and keep power.

Landlords and the utility companies steal from workers in a similar way. The government insures that business goes on as usual and even runs some industries. Education is bought and sold like a commodity, and students are trained for further exploitation in factories and offices. The decisions about what will be produced, how much will be charged and how goods and services will be distributed are made in a "top-down" way in political centers by bureaucrats and capitalists.

People are taught to play a passive role in society, to take uninteresting and low-paying jobs, to vote for candidates that really have nothing to offer, to experience life through television and movies and to accept racial and sexual oppression as normal. Meanwhile, thousands of people are going to jail, becoming addicts or committing suicide.



What We Want

It is not enough, we think, to try to reform society. The exploiter-exploited relationship, protected as it is the world over by all of the governments and social institutions (churches, philanthropies schools, etc.) must be done away with. The capitalist system, in which one person works for another's profit and then lives only to work in that framework, is full of contradictions and shortcomings.

The decisions on what will be produced and distributed, on how housing and community problems will be solved, and on how natural resources will be allocated must be made by the working class on a local level. This must be done through democratic organizations controlled by the rank-and-file.

Education must be democratic and non-hierarchical and must be available to all. Racial and sexual barriers must be abolished. In short, the working class must emancipate itself. We think that it can only do so by building organizations in which all workers and students can participate, and from which all will benefit. The center of such organizations will be the workplace, the school, and the community.

The tactics we think are most useful are the general strike and the takeover of workplaces, schools and communities for rank-and-file control and for immediate necessary gains. Revolutionary unions and councils must be created to fight for decentralized economic planning and generalized self-management. Anarchist-syndicalism is the sum total of these objectives and offers the means by which to obtain them.

Subscriptions to ON THE LINE are \$1.00 for 6 issues. Send subs to:

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The Libertarian Workers Group is affiliated with the Anarchist Communist Federation of North America and with the International Workers Association.